THE ART & SCIENCE OF

Coffee Buying

A Complete Professional Guide to Sourcing, Cupping, and Building a World-Class Coffee Program

By George Escobar (An inspiration from the book "Dear Coffee Buyer by Ryan Brown — A Guide to Green Coffee Buying" So you dont have to buy :)). It covers all the topics from the content, topics and parts.

From Green Coffee Selection to Cup Quality

FOREWORD

Coffee is one of the most traded commodities on earth, and yet the work of buying it — truly buying it with intention, knowledge, and care — remains one of the least understood crafts in the specialty coffee industry. Roasters speak at length about roast profiles. Baristas are celebrated for their latte art and brew ratios. But the coffee buyer, the person responsible for choosing which coffees ever reach the roastery in the first place, often operates quietly behind the scenes.

This book exists to change that. Whether you are a first-time buyer stepping into the role at a small roasting company, an experienced sourcing professional looking to sharpen your thinking, or simply a coffee enthusiast who wants to understand what happens between the farm and the roaster's door, these pages are written for you.

The craft of coffee buying is simultaneously deeply human and rigorously technical. It asks you to build trust with farmers and exporters across language and cultural barriers, to evaluate flavor with precision and consistency, to forecast demand months in advance, and to communicate your findings clearly to colleagues and customers. It asks, in short, that you be a relationship builder, a sensory scientist, a logistician, and a storyteller all at once.

"Great coffee begins long before the roast. It begins with a buyer who cares deeply about every step of the journey."

The chapters that follow cover all of this ground. Part One addresses the commercial and relational side of buying — how to build your offering philosophy, work with suppliers, negotiate prices, manage samples, and control quality. Part Two dives into the technical and agricultural dimensions — processing methods, cultivars, origins, seasonality, defects, and storage. Part Three offers guidance for those who are just starting

out, along with lessons drawn from the most respected buyers working today.

Throughout, the aim is not to be prescriptive — there is no single right way to buy coffee — but to give you a framework for thinking clearly, acting ethically, and building a coffee program you can be genuinely proud of. The best buyers are curious, humble, and tireless. May this book help you become one of them.

PART ONE

The Business of Buying

Relationships, Decisions, and the Coffee Behind the Counter

CHAPTER 1

Coffee Buying

What is coffee buying? What is a coffee buyer?

At its most fundamental, coffee buying is the process by which a roasting company — or any business that sells coffee — selects, negotiates for, purchases, and imports green coffee. Green coffee refers to unroasted coffee beans, which are the raw agricultural product that arrives at a roastery before any heat is applied. The buyer is the professional responsible for navigating every step of that process, from identifying potential coffees through cupping to ensuring that contracted lots arrive in good condition and on time.

The role sounds simple on the surface, but it quickly reveals itself to be extraordinarily complex. A coffee buyer must understand agronomy, sensory science, international trade law, logistics, commodity pricing, cultural diplomacy, and consumer marketing — often all at once, and often across a dozen time zones. The Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) defines specialty coffee as coffee that scores 80 points or above on its 100-point scale, and buyers operating in the specialty segment are expected to cup — that is, to taste and evaluate coffee according to standardized protocols — with both precision and consistency.

The Spectrum of Coffee Buyers

Not all coffee buyers work in the same context, and it is worth understanding the landscape. At one end of the spectrum are commodity buyers who purchase vast quantities of coffee based almost entirely on price and specification, with little regard for origin or farm-level quality. At the other end are specialty and micro-lot buyers who travel to producing countries, cup hundreds of samples, and build relationships directly with individual farmers and cooperatives. Most buyers in practice fall somewhere between these two poles.

Within specialty coffee, the buyer's job description can vary significantly depending on the size and structure of the company. At a large multi-roaster, the buying team might be divided by region — one person

covering Ethiopia and East Africa, another covering Latin America, a third focused on Asia-Pacific. At a small craft roastery, a single person might handle all of this while also managing wholesale accounts, training baristas, and running the social media accounts.

What Does a Coffee Buyer Actually Do?

On a given day, a coffee buyer might be cupping ten samples sent by exporters from three different countries, writing feedback reports, corresponding with producers about harvest timing, reviewing import documents with a freight forwarder, updating a tracking spreadsheet for incoming shipments, meeting with the head roaster to align on quality expectations, and responding to a customer asking why their favorite Yirgacheffe has gone out of stock. No two days are the same, and that unpredictability is part of what makes the role so engaging.

The SCA's Coffee Buyer's Guide and the work of organizations like the Coffee Quality Institute (CQI) have helped formalize much of what coffee buyers are expected to know and do. The Q Grader certification program, administered by the CQI, is widely considered the gold standard for sensory evaluation in specialty coffee. Many professional buyers hold Q Grader licenses, which require passing a rigorous series of exams covering sensory skills, cupping protocols, and coffee processing knowledge.

> *"A coffee buyer is, at their core, a translator — converting the language of the farm into something meaningful for the roaster, the barista, and the customer."*

Understanding coffee buying also means understanding the supply chain within which it operates. Coffee is grown in the tropical band known as the Bean Belt, between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. It is harvested, processed, dried, milled, sorted, graded, and exported from producing countries before traveling by sea freight to consuming countries. The buyer participates in or oversees nearly every link in this chain, and their decisions reverberate forward and backward through it — affecting the livelihoods of farmers, the workload of roasters, and ultimately the experience of the customer holding a cup.

It is also worth noting what a coffee buyer is not. A buyer is not simply a shopper. The best buyers are active participants in quality development, working alongside producers to achieve better results year after year.

They are not passive receivers of whatever the market delivers; they are shapers of it. That distinction — between a transactional purchaser and a collaborative quality partner — is what separates good coffee buying from great coffee buying.

CHAPTER 2

Your Offering Philosophy

How do you decide what should be on your menu? What would you like your selection of coffees to accomplish?

Before you spend a single dollar on green coffee, you need to know what you are trying to accomplish. This is your offering philosophy — the set of values, priorities, and principles that guide your selection decisions. Without one, you are simply buying whatever seems interesting in a given moment, and the result will be a menu that feels random and incoherent to your customers. With one, every purchase you make becomes a deliberate act of curation.

Your offering philosophy should answer several key questions. What does your company stand for, and how should your coffee selection reflect that? Are you trying to showcase the widest possible range of origins and processing methods, or are you committed to depth over breadth — a smaller number of coffees sourced with exceptional thoroughness? Are you prioritizing accessibility, offering coffees that are approachable and easy to enjoy, or are you pushing toward the cutting edge of specialty coffee, seeking out unusual cultivars and experimental fermentation profiles that challenge and excite experienced palates?

Defining Your Pillars

Most experienced buyers find it helpful to articulate two to four core pillars that anchor their buying decisions. These might be something like: quality first, meaning every coffee must score above a certain threshold in internal cuppings; relationship-driven sourcing, meaning preference is always given to producers with whom the company has an ongoing partnership; geographic diversity, meaning the lineup should always represent at least four distinct producing regions; and seasonal freshness, meaning coffees are rotated regularly to ensure that what is offered is always near its peak.

The specifics of these pillars will vary enormously from company to company, and that is exactly as it should be. A buyer working for a high-

volume grocery coffee brand has a very different set of priorities than a buyer sourcing for a single-origin specialty roastery. Neither is wrong. The crucial thing is that the philosophy is explicit, shared across the team, and consistently applied.

"Your menu is a form of communication. Every coffee on it tells your customer something about who you are and what you believe."

Balancing Discovery and Reliability

One of the central tensions in building an offering is the balance between reliability and discovery. Customers who love a particular coffee — say, a washed Ethiopian that tastes of bergamot and jasmine — want to be able to come back for it season after season. At the same time, part of the joy of specialty coffee is the endless novelty it offers, with new harvests, new producers, and new processing methods constantly emerging. The best offering philosophies acknowledge both of these desires.

A common approach is to divide the lineup into core offerings and rotating seasonal selections. Core offerings might be a reliable espresso blend and a couple of tried-and-true single origins that are sourced from consistent partners year after year. Rotating selections then allow the buyer to introduce new discoveries, highlight exceptional micro-lots, and respond to what is particularly outstanding in a given harvest cycle without disrupting the baseline experience for regular customers.

Whatever approach you take, your offering philosophy should be documented, communicated to your team, and revisited periodically. The specialty coffee market moves quickly, and the principles that served you well three years ago may need updating as your customer base evolves, your supplier relationships mature, and your own palate and knowledge deepen. Treat your philosophy as a living document, not a carved stone tablet.

CHAPTER 3

The Long-Term Value of Investing in Relationships

How do you build meaningful working relationships with your suppliers?

Coffee is, at its heart, a relationship business. The most consistently excellent coffees in the world do not simply materialize on cupping tables because buyers are skilled evaluators. They arrive because buyers have taken the time to build genuine, enduring relationships with the people who grow and process them. This is a truth that cannot be over-emphasized, and it is one that separates the best buying programs from the merely competent ones.

Supplier relationships in specialty coffee exist at multiple levels. You may work with exporters and traders who aggregate and ship coffees from a given country; with cooperatives or washing stations that process and export coffee on behalf of many small farmers; with individual estate owners who control the entire process from tree to export; or with importers in your own country who act as intermediaries between you and the producing world. Each of these relationships requires a somewhat different approach, but all of them benefit from the same fundamental investment: time, consistency, and genuine interest.

Trust is Built Slowly and Lost Quickly

In coffee-producing countries, buyers from consuming countries arrive often and depart quickly. Many make promises — about purchase volumes, about return visits, about telling the producer's story — that they do not keep. The producers and exporters who have been in the business for any length of time have learned to be cautious about new relationships, because experience has taught them that enthusiasm does not always translate into loyalty.

This means that when you enter a new supplier relationship, you are starting at a trust deficit. The other party has likely been let down before, and your first task is to demonstrate through your actions — not just your words — that you are a different kind of buyer. You do this by showing up

when you say you will, paying on time and at the agreed price, being transparent about your needs and limitations, and following through on any commitments you make.

"The best supplier relationships feel less like business transactions and more like creative partnerships — two parties working together toward a shared standard of excellence."

The Practice of Visiting Origins

There is no substitute for visiting the places where your coffee comes from. Travel to producing countries is expensive and time-consuming, and it is not always feasible, particularly for smaller buying programs. But when it is possible, it transforms your understanding in ways that no number of cupping notes or exporter emails ever can. You see the terroir with your own eyes — the altitude, the soil, the shade canopy, the microclimate. You meet the farmers and understand what their lives actually look like. You taste the coffee at the source, often in ways you have never tasted it before.

More importantly, when a producer knows that you have walked their land, met their family, and understood the work behind every bag they ship you, the relationship changes. You are no longer an anonymous customer from a faraway country. You are a known person, a partner, someone worth calling when something exceptional comes up. That level of connection pays dividends over years and decades.

Consistency as a Form of Respect

One of the most meaningful things a buyer can offer a supplier is consistency — returning year after year to purchase at fair prices, providing honest and constructive feedback about the coffee, and communicating transparently about changes in demand or direction. For a small farm or cooperative that depends on export relationships for its economic survival, a buyer who comes back reliably is worth far more than one who swoops in once with a large order and is never heard from again.

This consistency also allows for genuine quality improvement over time. When a supplier knows that you will be back next year, they have an incentive to invest in better processing, better sorting, better storage. When you can share specific sensory feedback — this year's lot had more

brightness than last year's, and customers loved it; can we work toward that again? — you become a collaborative partner in quality development rather than a passive consumer of whatever the harvest delivers.

CHAPTER 4

The Importance of Being Responsive and Crystal Clear

How do you avoid miscommunication and confusion when working with suppliers?

In international coffee trade, miscommunication is not just inconvenient — it is expensive. A misunderstood specification can result in the wrong coffee being shipped. A missed email about a quality issue can delay a shipment by weeks. An unclear payment term can damage a relationship that took years to build. Clear, responsive communication is therefore not a soft skill to be cultivated when time permits; it is a professional discipline that sits at the core of effective buying.

The communication challenges in specialty coffee sourcing are substantial. You are often working across multiple time zones, in languages that may not be your first, with partners whose commercial vocabulary and cultural norms differ from your own. What reads as a polite inquiry to you may read as an urgent demand to your counterpart, or vice versa. What you consider a standard contract term may be unfamiliar to a small cooperative that has never exported directly before.

Clarity Before Anything Else

The foundational rule of supplier communication is simple: say exactly what you mean, and say it in the simplest possible terms. Avoid jargon, idioms, and colloquialisms that may not translate. When you specify a coffee, be as precise as possible: processing method, screen size, moisture content range, expected cupping score, packaging type, target shipment window. Do not assume that your counterpart has the same defaults and assumptions that you do.

Written confirmation of key agreements is essential. After any conversation — whether by phone, video call, or in person — follow up with a written summary of what was agreed. This habit protects both parties and serves as a reference point if questions arise later. It also

sends a signal to your suppliers that you are organized and serious, which builds confidence in the relationship.

"Clarity is a form of kindness. When you communicate precisely, you save your suppliers time, reduce their anxiety, and demonstrate that you respect their expertise."

Responsiveness as a Competitive Advantage

In a world where suppliers are often working with multiple buyers simultaneously, responsiveness sets you apart. When a producer has a small lot of exceptional coffee available and needs to know quickly whether you want it, the buyer who responds within a few hours gets the coffee. The buyer who takes three days to reply — even if their eventual answer would have been yes — often finds that the lot is gone.

Responsiveness does not mean being available around the clock or replying to every message within minutes. It means setting clear expectations about your communication rhythms and honoring them. If you tell a supplier that you will review their offer and respond by Friday, respond by Friday. If circumstances change and you cannot meet that commitment, communicate proactively rather than going silent. Silence is often interpreted as disinterest or disrespect, even when the reality is simply that you are busy.

Managing Complexity Across a Supplier Portfolio

As your buying program grows, the communication load increases rapidly. You may be managing active relationships with suppliers in eight or ten countries simultaneously, each with their own harvest timelines, quality profiles, shipping logistics, and communication preferences. A systematic approach — whether through a dedicated CRM tool, a well-organized spreadsheet, or specialized coffee-buying software — becomes essential for keeping track of conversations, commitments, and outstanding items.

Building templates for common communications — a standard sample request, a standard cupping feedback format, a standard contract confirmation — saves time and ensures consistency. But be careful not to let templates make your communication feel impersonal. The best buyers find ways to add a human touch even to routine correspondence,

acknowledging something specific about the supplier's situation or expressing genuine appreciation for their work.

CHAPTER 5

Making Nice with Your Suppliers

How do you keep your suppliers informed and eager to do repeat business with you?

There is a phrase sometimes used in the specialty coffee world: be a good buyer. It sounds obvious, almost too simple to be worth stating. But in practice, being a good buyer is a discipline that requires ongoing attention and deliberate habits. Suppliers remember the buyers who treat them well, and that memory has direct commercial consequences: the best lots go first to the most trusted relationships.

Keeping your suppliers informed is one of the clearest expressions of professional respect. This means sharing cupping results promptly and in useful detail, communicating updates about your sales and inventory, and being honest about changes in your needs or direction. A supplier who invested significant effort in preparing a special lot for you deserves to know how it was received — not just a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, but genuine sensory feedback that helps them understand what you valued and what you might like to see improved.

Sharing Good News

When a coffee performs well — when customers love it, when it sells out faster than anticipated, when a media outlet writes about it glowingly — share that news with your supplier. This kind of positive feedback is enormously motivating and is something that many producers rarely receive. They work incredibly hard under challenging conditions, often without knowing how their coffee is ultimately experienced or received. Closing that loop is one of the most meaningful things a buyer can do.

Some buyers go further, sharing customer reviews, social media posts, or even photos of the coffee being brewed and enjoyed. This kind of connection between the producer and the end consumer can be profoundly moving for everyone involved, and it reinforces why the work matters. It also creates goodwill that tends to persist long after a particular lot has been sold.

"The supplier who knows their coffee is loved is the supplier who works hardest to make it loveable again next year."

Honoring Commitments, Big and Small

Perhaps the most fundamental way to be a good buyer is to do what you say you will do, without exception. If you commit to a purchase, honor it. If you agree to a payment term, meet it. If you promise to send feedback within two weeks, send it within two weeks. The accumulation of kept commitments is what builds the kind of trust that sustains a relationship through difficult years — when a harvest is disappointing, when a shipment is delayed, when quality falls short of expectation.

Conversely, broken commitments — even small ones — accumulate in the other direction. A supplier who has been left waiting for feedback, who has had a payment arrive late without explanation, or who has had a promised order quietly cancelled without discussion, learns to lower their expectations of you. Over time, they begin to work around you rather than with you, protecting themselves by prioritizing buyers they trust more.

Saying Thank You

This may seem almost too obvious to mention, but genuine expressions of gratitude are rarer in commercial relationships than they should be. When a supplier goes out of their way to accommodate a special request, resolves a logistics problem quickly, or produces something genuinely remarkable, say so — specifically and sincerely. Acknowledge the effort behind the result. This practice costs nothing and builds an enormous amount of goodwill over time.

CHAPTER 6

When to Give Advice to Suppliers

How do you communicate your broad learnings to your valued suppliers?

As a buyer with access to consumer markets, sensory feedback, and a broad view of quality trends across many origins, you are in possession of information that can be genuinely useful to your suppliers. Sharing that information thoughtfully is one of the most valuable contributions you can make to the relationship — and to the broader project of improving coffee quality at origin.

However, the act of giving advice to producers is fraught with potential for misunderstanding and offense if not approached with humility and care. Coffee farming is not a simple undertaking. Producers are dealing with complex agroecological systems, labor constraints, infrastructure limitations, climate variability, and economic pressures that a buyer sitting in a consuming country may understand only superficially. Arriving with confident prescriptions — you should try anaerobic processing, or you need to sort better — without understanding the full context of what is possible and practical in a given situation is unlikely to be helpful and may damage the relationship.

The Difference Between Observation and Prescription

The most effective way to share learnings with suppliers is to lead with observation rather than prescription. Instead of saying you need to extend your drying time, you might say: in the cuppings we did this year, we noticed that the lots with cleaner finishes tended to come from producers who had extended their drying time. We found that characteristic very appealing in the cup. This conveys the same information but frames it as something you observed from the consumer side, leaving the producer to apply it — or not — in whatever way makes sense given their specific circumstances.

Similarly, when sharing sensory feedback, be specific about what you experienced in the cup and how it was received by your customers, without necessarily attributing it to a cause or prescribing a solution. The

producer may well know exactly what caused the characteristic you are describing and may already be working to address it. Or they may have context that changes your interpretation entirely.

"The best advice a buyer can give is offered with open hands, not a pointing finger — information shared in the spirit of partnership, not correction."

Timing and Context

When you give feedback also matters. Sensory feedback is most useful when it is close enough to the harvest that the producer can still act on it for the next season, but not so close that they are in the middle of the harvest crunch and cannot absorb it. A post-harvest debrief, conducted when the season is complete and there is a moment of reflection before preparations for the next cycle begin, is often an ideal moment for more substantive quality conversations.

In-person conversations during origin visits are often the best context for nuanced feedback, because they allow for immediate dialogue, question-and-answer, and the kind of rapport-building that makes honest feedback feel like a gift rather than a criticism. When in-person conversation is not possible, video calls are preferable to emails for anything that requires significant explanation or that could be misinterpreted without the benefit of tone and facial expression.

CHAPTER 7

Forecasting

How do you determine how much coffee to buy? Is it better to err on the side of buying too much or buying too little?

Forecasting is one of the most analytically demanding aspects of coffee buying, and it is also one of the most consequential. Buy too little, and you risk running out of your most popular coffees, disappointing customers, and missing revenue. Buy too much, and you tie up capital in inventory that ages past its peak, occupies warehouse space, and may eventually have to be sold at a discount or discarded. Getting the balance right requires a combination of historical data analysis, knowledge of the supply landscape, understanding of your own business trajectory, and a healthy tolerance for uncertainty.

The starting point for any forecast is your sales history. How much of each coffee did you sell in the past year, broken down by month? Are there seasonal patterns — higher sales in fall and winter, for example — that you should account for? Which coffees sold out faster than expected, suggesting you under-bought, and which lingered, suggesting you over-bought? This data, carefully analyzed, gives you a baseline from which to project forward.

Building Your Forecast

From your baseline, you then apply a growth or adjustment factor based on your expectations for the coming year. If you are adding new wholesale accounts, launching a new retail channel, or planning a significant marketing push, your demand will likely be higher than the historical baseline suggests. If you are losing accounts, reducing your offerings, or planning any period of reduced operations, you may need to forecast lower than the historical trend would indicate.

It is also important to account for the supply side of the equation. Some coffees are available in abundance every year and can be purchased close to the time they are needed. Others — exceptional micro-lots from high-demand producers, for example — are in limited supply and must be

secured well in advance, often before you have a precise sense of how much you will need. For these coffees, a conservative forecast that captures a meaningful quantity without over-committing is usually the right approach.

"A good forecast is not a prediction of the future. It is a structured way of making the best possible decision with incomplete information."

The Over/Under Question

The question of whether it is better to err on the side of buying too much or too little does not have a universal answer, but it does have a framework for thinking. Green coffee has a finite shelf life in terms of peak quality, typically ranging from twelve to thirty-six months depending on the coffee and the storage conditions. The older the green coffee, the more likely it is to taste flat, papery, or bagged — qualities that specialty coffee customers will notice and that will undermine the quality of your program.

For most specialty buyers, this argues in favor of buying slightly less rather than slightly more. A coffee that you run out of can be explained and replaced; a coffee that you are still selling a year past its prime does lasting damage to your reputation and your customers' trust. The exception is when a particular coffee is irreplaceable — a once-in-a-season micro-lot from a relationship producer that will not come back — in which case the calculus may shift toward buying a generous quantity and investing in optimal storage to preserve it as long as possible.

Finally, good forecasting is a habit as much as a skill. Review your forecasts against actuals at regular intervals, understand where and why they diverged, and refine your methodology accordingly. Over time, your predictions will improve, and your inventory management will become smoother and more efficient.

CHAPTER 8

Samples

What are the different types of coffee samples? What do they represent?

Samples are the currency of coffee buying. Before any meaningful purchasing decision can be made, a buyer needs to taste the coffee in question — and the sample is the vehicle through which that tasting happens. Understanding the different types of samples, what each one represents, and how to interpret them correctly is fundamental to making good purchasing decisions and avoiding costly mistakes.

The coffee industry has developed a taxonomy of sample types that, while not perfectly standardized across all markets and relationships, provides a useful framework for understanding what you are tasting and what conclusions it is and is not appropriate to draw from it.

Pre-Shipment Samples

A pre-shipment sample, sometimes called a pre-ship sample, is drawn from the actual lot that has been contracted for purchase before it is shipped. This sample represents your last meaningful opportunity to verify that the coffee you are about to receive matches the quality you agreed to pay for. Pre-shipment samples should be cupped carefully against the original offer samples that led to the purchase, with any significant deviations flagged immediately with the supplier.

The pre-shipment sample is arguably the most important sample type in the buying process because it is the one that corresponds most directly to what will actually be in the bags when they arrive. If a pre-ship sample fails to meet the agreed specification, you have the right — and the professional obligation — to raise the issue before the coffee ships, while you still have leverage and options.

Offer Samples

An offer sample is sent by an exporter or producer to interest a buyer in a particular lot. It is typically a small quantity — anywhere from 100 to 400 grams — and it should be representative of the lot being offered. The word

'should' carries a great deal of weight here: offer samples are occasionally not fully representative, whether because of careless sampling or, in less scrupulous cases, because a better-than-average portion of the lot was used to create the sample. Building a relationship with honest suppliers who take sampling seriously is therefore one of the buyer's most important ongoing tasks.

"Never buy a coffee without tasting it. And never mistake the sample for the whole — it is a window into the lot, not the lot itself."

Arrival Samples

An arrival sample is drawn from a lot after it has arrived in the destination country and is waiting in a warehouse. This sample type allows you to verify that the coffee has survived the shipping process without damage — that it has not been contaminated, excessively heated, or exposed to moisture during transit. Arrival samples are particularly important for coffees that have traveled long distances or through unusual routing, where the risk of quality degradation is higher.

Reference and Type Samples

A reference sample, sometimes called a type sample, is not from a specific lot but rather represents the general quality standard that a supplier is working to achieve. It serves as a benchmark for negotiation — you are not buying that exact coffee, but rather agreeing to a purchase contingent on the actual lot meeting or exceeding that standard. Reference samples are commonly used when purchasing before harvest, when the actual coffee does not yet exist in exportable form.

Understanding which type of sample you are evaluating at any given moment is essential for interpreting your cupping results correctly. A brilliant offer sample that does not hold up in the pre-ship can be the source of significant frustration and financial loss. A pre-ship that matches the offer perfectly, on the other hand, is a sign of a trustworthy supplier and a reliable supply chain.

CHAPTER 9

Processing Samples

How do you manage and prepare samples?

The way you handle samples — from the moment they arrive at your facility to the moment you sit down to cup them — has a significant impact on the quality and reliability of your evaluations. Sloppy sample management leads to sloppy results, and sloppy results lead to poor purchasing decisions. Building rigorous sample processing protocols is therefore not bureaucratic overhead; it is a direct investment in the quality of your buying program.

Sample management begins with intake. When a sample arrives, it should be logged immediately with a unique identifier, the name of the supplier who sent it, the name or reference code of the lot, the date of receipt, and any other relevant information provided by the supplier. This information should be entered into whatever system you use to track samples — a spreadsheet, a dedicated cupping software platform, or a physical log — before the sample is placed into storage.

Storage Before Cupping

Green coffee samples should be stored in a cool, dry, dark environment away from strong odors. Coffee is remarkably absorptive, and a sample stored near cleaning products, food items, or even other strongly aromatic coffees can pick up off-aromas that will corrupt your cupping results. The sample should remain in its original packaging or in an airtight container until you are ready to roast it.

The timing between sample receipt and cupping matters as well. Freshly milled coffee that has been recently milled and bagged may need a few days to degas and stabilize before cupping. Very old samples that have been in storage for an extended period may show quality degradation that reflects the storage history as much as the coffee's intrinsic qualities. Ideally, samples are cupped within a reasonable window after receipt — within two to four weeks for most purposes — to give a fair representation of the coffee's current quality.

"A cupping is only as reliable as the preparation that precedes it. Treat every sample with the same care you would want your own coffee to receive."

Sample Roasting

Sample roasting is a craft in itself. The goal is to achieve a roast that reveals the coffee's intrinsic characteristics without imposing the roaster's own signature on the result. Most specialty buyers aim for a medium roast for cupping purposes — light enough to preserve origin character and acidity, dark enough to have fully developed the coffee's aromatic compounds and resolved any grassy or underdeveloped notes.

The SCA cupping protocol calls for a roast color that falls within a defined range (typically 58-63 on the Agtron scale for whole beans, or 63-68 for ground), reached within a defined time window (8-12 minutes), with a rest period of 8-24 hours between roasting and cupping. Following these standards allows your results to be compared meaningfully with results from other buyers and labs around the world — a critical consideration if you are working within a collaborative sourcing network or seeking third-party validation of your quality assessments.

Maintaining a Sample Archive

Many experienced buyers maintain a sample archive — a collection of roasted or green samples from past lots, stored under controlled conditions, that can be referenced for future comparison. This allows you to conduct longitudinal evaluations, comparing this year's harvest from a given producer with last year's, or tracking how a particular coffee changes as it ages in green form. A well-maintained sample archive is a powerful tool for quality calibration and relationship management.

CHAPTER 10

Taking Notes and Sharing Results

How do you communicate the cupping results with your coworkers and suppliers?

Cupping without note-taking is like reading without retention. The act of writing down what you perceive during a cupping session serves multiple purposes simultaneously: it forces you to articulate your sensory impressions with precision, it creates a record that you can return to later, and it produces the raw material for the feedback you will share with suppliers and colleagues. Good cupping notes are one of the most important outputs of the buying process.

The SCA cupping form provides a standardized framework for evaluating coffee across ten attributes: fragrance and aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, body, balance, uniformity, clean cup, sweetness, and overall impression. Each attribute is scored on a structured scale, with the sum of the scores producing a total out of 100 points. Using a standardized form, even if you adapt it to your own preferences, ensures that your evaluations are internally consistent over time and comparable with industry benchmarks.

Developing a Sensory Vocabulary

One of the most valuable investments a buyer can make is developing a rich and precise sensory vocabulary. The SCA Flavor Wheel, developed in collaboration with researchers at the University of California, Davis, provides a hierarchical taxonomy of coffee flavors — from broad categories like fruity, floral, and nutty, down to specific descriptors like raspberry, jasmine, and hazelnut. Working with this framework, and supplementing it with the World Coffee Research Sensory Lexicon, helps buyers develop consistent, communicable descriptions of what they perceive.

The practical implication is that note-taking should be specific rather than vague. 'Nice acidity' tells your colleagues and suppliers almost nothing useful. 'Bright, juicy acidity reminiscent of blood orange, with a pleasant

tartness that dissipates cleanly in the finish' tells them a great deal. The more precisely you can describe what you taste, the more useful your notes will be — both as a record for your own decision-making and as feedback that suppliers can act on.

"The best cupping notes read like a conversation between the coffee and the person who tasted it — honest, specific, and full of genuine feeling."

Calibration Sessions

Even the most experienced tasters have subjective biases, and those biases can create inconsistencies in scoring and note-taking over time. Regular calibration sessions — where two or more buyers cup the same coffees independently and then compare results — are an essential practice for maintaining reliability. When scores diverge significantly, the discussion that follows is often where the deepest learning happens: understanding why two trained palates perceived a coffee differently reveals something important about both the coffee and the tasters.

Communicating Results to Suppliers

How you communicate cupping results to suppliers will depend on your relationship with them, their technical background, and the context of the evaluation. For sophisticated export partners who are accustomed to working with specialty buyers, a detailed cupping form with attribute scores and descriptive notes is often welcome and expected. For smaller producers or cooperatives with less experience in the specialty market, a more narrative format that translates technical language into accessible descriptions may be more useful.

Regardless of format, timely feedback is critical. Suppliers who send samples and hear nothing for weeks or months learn, correctly, that their efforts are not being taken seriously. A commitment to providing feedback within a defined window — two weeks from receipt of sample, for example — signals respect and encourages suppliers to continue prioritizing your requests.

CHAPTER 11

Pricing

How much should you charge for your coffee?

Pricing is where the art and science of coffee buying intersect most directly with the business realities that sustain a roasting company. Setting prices requires balancing multiple competing considerations: covering your costs, generating a margin that supports your operations and growth, reflecting the quality and story of the coffee you are selling, remaining competitive in your market, and — in the case of specialty coffee — honoring the investment made by the producers who grew and processed the coffee.

The starting point for any pricing decision is cost. You need to know, with precision, what a given coffee costs you from the moment it leaves the producer's facility to the moment it is roasted, bagged, and ready for sale. This fully-loaded cost includes the green coffee price (the FOB price paid to the exporter), ocean freight, import duties and taxes, warehouse and handling fees, roasting costs, packaging costs, and any quality control or testing costs incurred along the way. Many roasters underestimate their true cost of goods by failing to account for all of these line items, which leads to pricing that looks viable but is actually eroding margin.

Market Positioning and Value Communication

Beyond costs, pricing is a statement about how you position your brand in the market. Specialty coffee customers are, by and large, willing to pay premium prices for exceptional quality and compelling stories — but they need to understand what they are paying for. A $30-per-bag price point can feel entirely reasonable to a customer who understands that the coffee is a micro-lot from a multigenerational farm at altitude, picked by hand and processed with meticulous care. The same price point may feel arbitrary and unjustified without that context.

This is why pricing strategy cannot be separated from storytelling and communication. The price you charge must be supported by the narrative you build around the coffee, and that narrative must be accessible, honest,

and compelling. We will return to storytelling in Chapter 16, but it is worth noting here that the investment you make in understanding and communicating origin stories is not just a marketing expense — it is a structural support for your pricing architecture.

"Price is not just a number on a tag. It is a signal about quality, about values, and about the kind of coffee experience you are offering."

Tiering and Portfolio Pricing

Most coffee programs benefit from a tiered pricing structure that allows customers with different budgets and priorities to engage with the range. A well-designed tier might include a foundational offering — reliably excellent, approachably priced — and progressively more premium tiers for exceptional micro-lots, competition-grade coffees, or rare cultivar expressions. This structure allows you to serve a wide range of customers without compromising your positioning at any level.

When setting prices across a portfolio, be conscious of the relationship between tiers. If your foundational offering is priced at $18 per bag and your premium micro-lot is at $19, customers will perceive little distinction and will tend to gravitate toward the lower price. Meaningful price differentiation signals meaningful quality differentiation, and it gives your team something honest to communicate when making recommendations.

CHAPTER 12

Negotiating Price with Suppliers

How do you proceed to purchase a selection?

Price negotiation in specialty coffee is a distinctive and often misunderstood process. It is not the adversarial haggling of a commodity market, where every dollar one party gains is a dollar the other party loses. At its best, specialty coffee price negotiation is a collaborative conversation about value — what the coffee is worth, what it cost to produce, what the market will bear, and how a fair price can be established that sustains the producer and supports the buyer's program.

That said, negotiation is still negotiation, and it requires skill, preparation, and a clear sense of your own position. Walking into a price conversation without knowing your cost ceiling — the maximum you can pay for a coffee and still sell it profitably at an appropriate price point — puts you at a significant disadvantage. Know your numbers before you engage.

Understanding the Supplier's Position

Effective negotiation begins with understanding the other party's position as clearly as possible. For a coffee exporter or producer, the relevant factors include their cost of production (which varies significantly by country, region, and farm type), the current commodity market price (which sets a floor for many producers), their export obligations and timing constraints, and the competitive landscape of buyers they are working with.

Producers in countries with high production costs — such as Hawaii or Japan — have fundamentally different cost structures than producers in countries where labor and land are less expensive. Understanding these structural realities helps you approach price conversations with appropriate context and prevents you from making offers that are insulting or unrealistic, even if unintentionally.

"Fair pricing is not charity — it is the foundation of a supply chain that can sustain quality over the long term."

The Process of Making an Offer

When you have cupped a coffee and decided you want to purchase it, the typical process begins with the supplier's asking price. Evaluate that price relative to your cost ceiling, comparable coffees in the market, and your assessment of the coffee's quality. If the asking price is within your range and you believe it is fair, there is no shame in accepting it — indeed, accepting fair prices without unnecessary negotiation is a form of respect for the supplier's expertise and valuation of their own work.

If the asking price is above your ceiling, or if you believe it does not reflect the quality you cupped, communicate that clearly and honestly. Explain your reasoning — not just that you cannot pay that price, but why: what you cupped, how it compares to other coffees at that price point in your lineup, what price would allow you to sell the coffee effectively. This kind of transparency invites a real conversation rather than a positional standoff.

Be willing to walk away if the numbers do not work. The ability to decline a purchase, even one you are excited about, is essential to maintaining the financial discipline that keeps a buying program viable. Suppliers respect buyers who know their limits; it makes them a more reliable commercial partner in the long run.

CHAPTER 13

Direct Trade

What is direct trade? What should it mean to you and your coffee buying?

Direct trade has become one of the most discussed and debated concepts in specialty coffee over the past two decades. The term was popularized in the mid-2000s, partly as a response to the perceived limitations of Fair Trade certification, and it was embraced enthusiastically by many specialty roasters as a way of signaling a commitment to ethical sourcing and close producer relationships. But as the term has proliferated, its meaning has become increasingly diffuse, and it is now used — not always accurately — to describe a wide range of sourcing approaches.

At its most meaningful, direct trade describes a sourcing relationship in which a buyer works directly with a coffee producer, bypassing some or all of the traditional intermediary layers — exporters, importers, brokers — to establish a more immediate commercial and personal connection. This directness is said to result in higher prices for producers, better quality feedback loops, stronger long-term relationships, and greater transparency throughout the supply chain.

The Spectrum of Directness

In practice, truly direct trade — where a roaster in the United States buys coffee directly from a farmer in Ethiopia, handling all the export logistics on the producer's behalf — is relatively rare and logistically very complex. What most buyers mean when they use the term is something closer to a transparent, relationship-based sourcing approach in which they know the producer, have visited (or plan to visit) the origin, pay above-market prices, and communicate openly about the terms of the transaction.

This is still valuable and meaningfully different from anonymous commodity purchasing, but buyers should be careful not to claim more directness than actually exists in their supply chain. Many excellent specialty coffees travel through one or more trusted intermediaries — exporters, importers, or both — before reaching a roaster, and this does not inherently diminish the quality or ethics of the sourcing if those

intermediaries are themselves operating transparently and paying fair prices at each step.

"Direct trade is not a certification or a marketing claim — it is an ongoing commitment to knowing where your coffee comes from and ensuring that the people who grow it are fairly compensated."

What Direct Trade Should Mean in Practice

Rather than getting too attached to the label, it is more useful to think about what the values underlying direct trade look like in practice. These include paying above the commodity market price for quality coffee; building long-term relationships with producers rather than shopping purely on price each year; visiting origins regularly enough to understand the realities of production; sharing sensory feedback that helps producers improve quality over time; and being transparent with customers about where your coffee comes from and how it was sourced.

If your sourcing relationships embody these values, you are doing what direct trade is supposed to mean — regardless of whether you use that particular term. And if they do not, no amount of marketing language will make them otherwise.

CHAPTER 14

Exporting

How do you deal with exporting and shipping?

The logistics of getting coffee from a producing country to your roastery are complex, expensive, and full of potential pitfalls. Understanding the export and shipping process thoroughly — even if you work with an importer who handles much of it on your behalf — is essential for managing timelines, protecting quality, and responding quickly when things go wrong.

Export documentation is the foundation of the international coffee trade. Each shipment requires a commercial invoice, a packing list, a bill of lading (or airway bill, for air freight), a certificate of origin, and, depending on the destination country, various phytosanitary certificates and import permits. Some specialty certifications — organic, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance — require additional documentation from certifying bodies. Missing or incorrect documentation can hold up a shipment at customs, sometimes for weeks, with serious consequences for quality and commercial relationships.

FOB, CIF, and Other Trade Terms

International commodity trades are typically structured around Incoterms — standardized international trade terms that define at what point responsibility for goods and freight costs transfers from seller to buyer. The most common terms in coffee trading are FOB (Free on Board) and CIF (Cost, Insurance, and Freight). Under FOB terms, the seller is responsible for the coffee until it is loaded onto the ship at the port of origin; after that, the buyer assumes risk and cost. Under CIF terms, the seller arranges and pays for freight and insurance all the way to the destination port.

FOB pricing is the most common basis for specialty coffee transactions, and when comparing prices from different suppliers, it is important to ensure you are comparing like with like — FOB prices from different ports

of origin represent very different total costs to you once you add freight from those ports to your destination.

"The ocean is the longest part of the supply chain, and the most opaque. Build enough buffer in your timelines to absorb its surprises."

Working with Importers

Many specialty roasters, particularly smaller ones, work with importing partners rather than handling the full export logistics themselves. Importers provide significant value: they have established relationships with customs brokers and freight forwarders, they maintain warehousing capacity in key ports, they manage the documentation process, and they absorb the complexity of international shipping so that roasters can focus on roasting and selling.

The trade-off is that working through an importer adds cost — typically a margin on top of the FOB price — and reduces the directness of your supplier relationship. Many buyers find this trade-off entirely worthwhile, at least until they reach a volume level that makes it practical to handle importing directly. Others, committed to maximum transparency and directness, invest early in building the relationships and systems needed to import directly.

Managing Shipment Timelines

Sea freight from major coffee-producing countries to North America or Europe typically takes between three and eight weeks, depending on the routing and the origin. Add to this the time required for export processing, port clearance at origin, and import clearance at destination, and the total lead time from purchase decision to coffee in your warehouse can easily be three to five months. Building this lead time into your forecasting and procurement planning is essential for maintaining continuous supply.

CHAPTER 15

Quality Control

How do you ensure that you will receive your coffee in its proper condition and set your roasters up for success?

Quality control in coffee buying is not a single act but a continuous process that spans from the moment you first taste a sample to the moment the last bag of a lot is roasted and the coffee is consumed. It requires attention at multiple stages of the supply chain, clear standards and protocols, and a willingness to act decisively when those standards are not met.

The most critical quality control intervention you can make happens before a coffee ships: the pre-shipment sample evaluation. As discussed in Chapter 8, this sample should be cupped carefully against the original offer and any agreed quality benchmark. If the pre-ship fails to meet your standards — whether in cup quality, moisture content, screen size, or defect count — you have the right and the obligation to communicate this to the supplier immediately and to resolve the discrepancy before the coffee leaves origin.

Green Coffee Standards

Green coffee quality is assessed along several dimensions. Physical defects — foreign matter, damaged beans, fungal damage, insect damage — are evaluated according to the SCA Green Coffee Defect Handbook, which categorizes defects as Category 1 (primary defects that significantly impact cup quality) or Category 2 (secondary defects that may have some impact). Specialty coffee must contain no Category 1 defects in a 350-gram sample, and no more than five Category 2 defects.

Moisture content is another critical parameter. Green coffee that is too wet (above 12.5% moisture content by SCAA standards) is at risk of developing mold and off-flavors during storage and transit. Coffee that is too dry (below 10%) may have been improperly processed and can taste woody or papery in the cup. Moisture meters are a standard quality

control tool, and moisture content should be verified for every lot before acceptance.

"Quality control is not about rejecting coffee — it is about creating the conditions in which excellence can be reliably reproduced."

Arrival Inspection and Lot Acceptance

When a shipment arrives at your warehouse, conduct a thorough arrival inspection before formally accepting the lot. This includes pulling samples from multiple bags at random to assess visual quality, checking for any evidence of moisture damage or contamination, verifying bag weights, and cupping arrival samples against your pre-ship records. Any significant deviation from the pre-ship standard should be documented and communicated to the supplier immediately.

Maintaining detailed lot acceptance records — including moisture readings, defect counts, cupping scores, and any quality issues noted — creates a valuable data trail that informs future purchasing decisions and provides the evidentiary basis for any quality claims or adjustments you may need to negotiate with suppliers.

Setting Up Your Roasters

Quality control does not end when the green coffee enters your warehouse. Roasters need to understand the characteristics and quirks of each lot they work with in order to develop appropriate roast profiles. Detailed sensory notes from your cupping evaluations, alongside any relevant processing or origin information, should be shared with the roasting team before they begin work on a new lot. This briefing helps roasters make informed decisions about approach and helps the whole team calibrate expectations for the coffee that will emerge on the other side of the drum.

CHAPTER 16

Storytelling

How do you communicate important details to customers about your coffees?

Specialty coffee is one of the most information-rich consumer products in the world. A single bag of single-origin coffee can carry information about its country, region, altitude, farm or cooperative, producer, varietal, processing method, harvest date, and flavor profile — and that is before you add the story of how the buyer found it, what the cupping revealed, or why it was selected. The challenge of storytelling is not finding material; it is deciding what to share, at what level of depth, and in what form.

The case for storytelling in specialty coffee is both ethical and commercial. Ethically, communicating the origin and story of a coffee gives credit to the people who produced it and helps consumers understand what they are paying for. Commercially, story-driven coffee commands higher prices, builds stronger customer loyalty, and differentiates your offering in a crowded market. A 2019 study published in the Journal of Consumer Research found that narratives about product origin significantly increased consumers' perceived value of — and willingness to pay for — agricultural products.

Levels of Detail

Not every customer wants the same depth of information about their coffee. Some want to know the country and a couple of flavor notes; they find more than that overwhelming or pretentious. Others are enthusiasts who want every detail, including the altitude, the processing variant, and the producer's name. A well-designed communication strategy accommodates both extremes without boring the first group or frustrating the second.

A useful framework is to think in layers. The first layer — the most visible, the one that reaches every customer — should be simple, evocative, and emotionally resonant. A coffee from a small family farm in the highlands of Colombia, sun-dried and tasting of stone fruit and dark chocolate, can be communicated in a single sentence that captures the essence without

demanding prior knowledge. The second layer, available to those who look for it, provides more detail: the region, the producer's name, the processing specifics, the cupping score. The third layer — available through your website, your customer newsletter, or your baristas — tells the full story for those who want it.

"The best coffee story is one that makes the customer feel connected to a place and a person they will never meet — and makes them want to return to that connection again and again."

Authenticity and Accuracy

Whatever story you tell, it must be true. The specialty coffee market is increasingly populated by consumers who are knowledgeable and skeptical, and who are quick to notice and call out exaggeration, vagueness, or outright fabrication. If you say a coffee was grown at 2,200 meters, it should have been grown at 2,200 meters. If you say the farmer has been cultivating Gesha for thirty years, verify that claim before you print it on a bag.

Accuracy in storytelling also means honesty about what you do not know. It is better to say that a coffee comes from a cooperative of small farmers in Sidama, Ethiopia, without claiming more specificity than you actually have, than to invent a single-producer narrative because it sounds more compelling. Customers who trust you will stay with you; customers who feel misled will not return.

PART TWO

The Craft of Quality

Processing, Origins, and the Science of the Cup

CHAPTER 17

Processing Methods and Their Cup Characteristics

How do various processing methods affect the flavor of coffee?

Processing refers to the set of operations performed on harvested coffee cherries to remove the fruit and prepare the seeds — the beans — for export and roasting. It is one of the most powerful levers in coffee flavor development, capable of producing dramatically different cup profiles from the same variety of coffee grown in the same location. Understanding processing methods and their sensory implications is therefore foundational knowledge for any coffee buyer.

Coffee cherries are processed by removing the outer skin and mucilage (the sticky, sugar-rich layer surrounding the seed) in varying degrees and sequences, using combinations of water, mechanical friction, and aerobic or anaerobic fermentation. The resulting green coffee then undergoes drying, which is where much of the flavor development associated with processing takes place. The major processing methods differ primarily in when and how the fruit is removed and how much of the fermentation happens while the fruit is still in contact with the seed.

Washed Processing

In washed (or wet) processing, the coffee cherry is depulped — the outer skin is mechanically removed — immediately after harvest. The remaining mucilage is then broken down through fermentation, typically lasting 24-72 hours, and removed by washing with water. The resulting parchment coffee (the seed still inside its inner husk, or parchment) is then dried, either on raised beds in the sun or using mechanical dryers.

Washed coffees are characterized by their clarity and brightness. Because the fruit is removed early in the process, the cup profile reflects primarily the intrinsic character of the seed and its terroir — the soil, the altitude, the microclimate — rather than the flavors imparted by prolonged contact with fruit sugars. Well-executed washed coffees from high altitudes often exhibit vibrant, complex acidity, clean floral aromas, and a delicate, tea-

like body. Ethiopia's washed Yirgacheffes, with their jasmine and bergamot notes, are among the most celebrated examples of this style.

Natural Processing

Natural (or dry) processing is the oldest method in coffee history. The whole cherry — skin, mucilage, and all — is dried intact, typically on raised beds or patios, for an extended period that can last anywhere from two to six weeks. During this time, the seeds ferment slowly inside the drying fruit, absorbing sugars and aromatic compounds from the surrounding material.

The result is a cup profile that is dramatically different from washed processing. Natural coffees tend to be fruit-forward and intensely sweet, with lower apparent acidity and a heavier, syrupy body. Common flavor descriptors include blueberry, strawberry, tropical fruit, wine, and chocolate. The trade-off is consistency: natural processing is more dependent on careful attention to drying conditions, turning frequency, and ambient humidity, and poorly managed naturals can exhibit fermentation defects — sourness, vinegar notes, and mustiness — that ruin an otherwise excellent coffee.

"The same coffee, processed two different ways, can taste like two entirely different coffees. Processing is where the farmer becomes an artist."

Honey Processing

Honey processing occupies the middle ground between washed and natural. The cherry is depulped — the outer skin removed — but some or all of the mucilage is left on the parchment during drying. The amount of mucilage retained is described by color designations: yellow honey (the least mucilage), red honey, and black honey (the most mucilage, producing results closest to natural processing). Honey coffees first gained popularity in Costa Rica and have since spread widely across Latin America and beyond.

Honey-processed coffees typically exhibit a profile that blends characteristics of washed and natural: a fuller body and more pronounced sweetness than a washed coffee, with cleaner, more controlled fruit notes

than a natural. They are often described as having a stone fruit character — peach, apricot, plum — with a silky, rounded mouthfeel.

Anaerobic and Experimental Processing

In recent years, an explosion of experimental processing techniques has introduced new flavor dimensions into specialty coffee. Anaerobic fermentation — in which depulped or whole cherries are fermented in sealed, oxygen-deprived containers, sometimes with the addition of specific yeast or bacteria cultures — can produce intense, novel flavor profiles that bear little resemblance to traditionally processed coffees from the same origin. Carbon dioxide maceration, lactic fermentation, and fruit co-fermentation are among the techniques being explored.

These experimental methods are exciting from a flavor perspective but present specific challenges for buyers: the profiles can be polarizing, the shelf life of the distinctive fermentation notes is sometimes shorter than that of more conventionally processed coffees, and the difficulty of reproducing consistent results can make repeatability a challenge. Buyers working with these coffees should cup them with their full team and their most adventurous customers in mind.

CHAPTER 18

Cultivars and Their Cup Characteristics

How do the various cultivars affect flavor?

Coffee's flavor potential is shaped by many factors — soil, altitude, climate, processing, roast — but one of the most fundamental is genetics. The variety (more precisely, the cultivar) of coffee plant from which the beans are harvested has a profound effect on the cup's aromatic complexity, acidity, body, and flavor profile. Understanding cultivar diversity, and being able to discuss it meaningfully, is an increasingly important skill for the modern coffee buyer.

The vast majority of specialty coffee belongs to the species Coffea arabica, which contains enormous genetic diversity within it. Over centuries of cultivation, migration, and intentional and accidental selection, arabica has diversified into hundreds of named varieties, ranging from ancient wild Ethiopian landraces to modern rust-resistant hybrids developed in research stations. The World Coffee Research Variety Catalog, launched in 2016, is the most comprehensive reference currently available for understanding this genetic landscape.

Typica and Bourbon: The Genetic Ancestors

Nearly all arabica cultivars trace their ancestry to two foundational varieties: Typica and Bourbon. Typica is among the oldest cultivated forms of arabica and was the primary variety disseminated from Yemen to the rest of the world during the early centuries of coffee trade. It is known for producing excellent cup quality — clean, sweet, with delicate acidity — but is low-yielding and susceptible to disease. Most of the world's beloved specialty varieties, including Blue Mountain, Kona, and Maragogipe, are Typica descendants.

Bourbon emerged as a spontaneous mutation of Typica on the island of Réunion (formerly Bourbon) in the 18th century. It produces higher yields than Typica, is known for rich sweetness and complexity, and has given rise to a large family of descendant varieties, including Caturra, Catuai, and SL28. Bourbon coffees, particularly from Central America and

Rwanda, are celebrated for their complex acidity, caramel sweetness, and full body.

Gesha: The Star of the Modern Specialty Market

No variety has captured the imagination — and the premium prices — of the modern specialty coffee world more than Gesha (also spelled Geisha). Originally collected from the Gesha region of Ethiopia, the variety was brought to Costa Rica in the 1950s for disease research and eventually made its way to Panama, where it was propagated on the famous Hacienda La Esmeralda. When La Esmeralda first entered Gesha in the Best of Panama competition in 2004, it scored higher than any coffee in the competition's history and sold for a then-record price at auction.

Gesha's cup profile is unlike almost any other variety: intensely aromatic, with jasmine, bergamot, tropical fruit, and stone fruit notes of exceptional clarity and complexity. It is a difficult variety to grow well — it is tall, low-yielding, and sensitive to conditions — but when the stars align, it produces cups that experienced tasters describe as transformative. Gesha is now grown in many producing countries, including Colombia, Ethiopia, Japan, and China, with quality and price varying significantly by origin and producer.

"Cultivar is the fingerprint of a coffee's potential — what the plant is capable of, given the right conditions."

Ethiopian Heirlooms and Landrace Diversity

Ethiopia occupies a unique position in the genetic landscape of arabica coffee because it is the birthplace of the species. Ethiopian coffees, particularly those from Yirgacheffe, Guji, Sidama, and Harrar, are often sold as 'heirloom' varieties — a term that reflects the extraordinary genetic diversity present in Ethiopian coffee populations, where a single farm may contain thousands of distinct genetic varieties. This diversity is both a source of great flavor complexity and a challenge for traceability, as the sheer number of varieties makes precise genetic identification difficult and expensive.

For buyers, the key point is that the flavor profiles associated with specific Ethiopian growing regions are the result not just of terroir but also of this underlying genetic diversity, which has co-evolved with the local

environment over millennia. Buying great Ethiopian coffee means honoring that complexity, even when it resists easy categorization.

CHAPTER 19

EKCG — The Elite Origins

Which coffee-producing origins rise above the rest?

Among the many coffee-producing countries in the world, a handful have achieved a special status in the specialty coffee community — producing coffees with a frequency and consistency of excellence that sets them apart from the broader field. These origins have built their reputations over decades of quality-focused production, and they attract the highest prices, the most devoted buyer attention, and the most passionate consumer interest. Here we examine what some buyers and educators have termed the EKCG origins: Ethiopia, Kenya, Colombia, and Guatemala, though this grouping is debated and should be understood as a starting point rather than a definitive ranking.

Ethiopia: The Origin of Origins

Ethiopia is the birthplace of arabica coffee and arguably the most complex single-origin coffee landscape on earth. Coffee grows wild in the forests of Ethiopia's southwestern highlands, and the country's agro-biodiversity — the sheer number of distinct coffee varieties that have evolved over thousands of years — is unmatched anywhere in the world. Ethiopian coffees can be broadly categorized by region: Yirgacheffe, in the Gedeo Zone of the Southern Nations, produces the country's most celebrated washed coffees, characterized by intense floral aromatics (jasmine, bergamot), bright citric acidity, and a delicate, tea-like body. Guji and Sidama produce both washed and natural coffees of great character. Harrar, in the east, produces natural coffees with wild, wine-like complexity.

Ethiopia is also significant for its auction system. The Ethiopian Coffee Exchange (ECX), established in 2008, changed the way Ethiopian coffee was traded, creating a more formalized and transparent market. More recently, the Direct Trade Law and reforms to the ECX have created new pathways for international buyers to source more directly from specific producers, which has accelerated the development of traceable micro-lot Ethiopian coffees with unprecedented specificity.

Kenya: Precision and Intensity

Kenyan coffee occupies a unique sensory niche. At its best, it delivers a combination of attributes rarely found together in a single cup: intense, complex acidity (often described as blackcurrant, tomato, or tamarind), a full, rich body, and an aromatic complexity that can include floral, fruit, and savory notes simultaneously. This profile is the result of Kenya's combination of high altitude, well-developed soil (the famous red volcanic soil of the Central Province), advanced processing infrastructure, and a grading system that has historically incentivized quality.

Kenya's coffee industry is dominated by smallholder farmers organized into cooperative societies, which deliver cherry to centralized wet mills called factories. The resulting coffee is graded by screen size — AA (the largest), AB, PB (peaberry), C, and so on — with AA commanding the highest prices. Kenya's coffee is sold primarily through the Nairobi Coffee Exchange, though direct relationships with factories and cooperatives are increasingly possible.

Colombia: Consistency and Accessibility

Colombia's coffee program is one of the most organized and brand-savvy in the world, driven largely by the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation (FNC) and the globally recognized Juan Valdez marketing campaign. The country produces coffee across a wide range of microclimates, altitudes, and regions, from the classic mild, nutty, chocolatey coffees of Huila and Nariño to the brighter, more acidic expressions of the Sierra Nevada and Santander.

For buyers, Colombia's greatest strengths are its consistency, its well-developed export infrastructure, and its enormous geographic diversity — which means that when one region is in the shoulder season, another is approaching peak quality. The country is also becoming an increasingly exciting source for experimental cultivars and processing innovations, with producers exploring Gesha, Pink Bourbon, and anaerobic methods at an accelerating rate.

Guatemala: Altitude and Complexity

Guatemala's specialty coffee heritage is built on the concept of microregion — the country's Specialty Coffee Association (Anacafé) has identified and promoted eight distinct coffee-producing regions, each with a recognized flavor profile tied to its specific combination of altitude, soil,

rainfall, and microclimate. Huehuetenango, the most celebrated of these regions, produces coffees at extreme altitudes (often above 1,800 meters) with remarkable complexity, bright acidity, and a distinctive floral-fruity character.

Guatemalan coffees are predominantly washed, processed through the country's extensive network of beneficios (wet mills), and exported by a mix of specialized exporters and direct-trade cooperatives. The country's cup quality at its best rivals anything in the world, and it has produced multiple World Barista Championship-winning coffees in recent years.

CHAPTER 20

The Best of the Rest

What are the other standout coffee-producing origins?

Beyond the elite tier discussed in the previous chapter, the coffee-producing world is rich with origins that consistently deliver excellent, distinctive, and exciting coffees. These origins deserve serious attention from any buyer who aspires to build a genuinely comprehensive and inspiring program. What follows is an overview of the most important among them.

Panama

Panama is a tiny coffee-producing country with a disproportionate impact on the specialty coffee world, owing almost entirely to the rise of Gesha. The country's Chiriquí Highlands, anchored by the Boquete and Volcán Candela growing areas on the slopes of Volcán Barú, provide conditions particularly well-suited to Gesha cultivation — cool nights, misty mornings, rich volcanic soils, and excellent infrastructure for processing. The Best of Panama auction has become one of the most prestigious and closely watched events in the global specialty coffee calendar, regularly achieving record prices that reflect the extraordinary quality of the coffees on offer.

Yemen

Yemen is one of the oldest coffee-producing countries in the world and the origin from which coffee spread to the rest of the globe during the 15th and 16th centuries. Yemeni coffees, grown on ancient terraced farms at high altitude and processed using traditional natural drying methods, have a distinctive wild, spiced, complex character that is unlike anything else in the specialty market. However, sourcing from Yemen has become extraordinarily challenging due to the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis, and buyers should approach with careful attention to supply chain ethics and logistics.

Burundi and Rwanda

These two neighboring Central African countries have become increasingly important sources of high-quality specialty coffee over the past two decades. Both benefit from ideal growing conditions — high altitude, equatorial climate, rich soils — and a growing infrastructure of well-equipped washing stations. Burundian coffees in particular have developed a devoted following for their vibrant acidity, floral aromatics, and juicy fruit sweetness, qualities that rival the best Kenyan and Ethiopian offerings when the crop is at its peak.

"Every origin has something singular to offer. The buyer who explores widely is rewarded with a depth of perspective that no narrow focus can provide."

Brazil

Brazil is the world's largest coffee producer by volume, responsible for approximately one-third of global coffee output. Its role in the specialty market is complex: while the country has historically been associated with lower-quality commodity coffee, Brazil has developed a thriving specialty sector producing coffees of genuine distinction. The country's cerrado and sul de minas regions are capable of producing naturally processed coffees with outstanding sweetness, chocolate, and nut character that work exceptionally well in espresso blends. The rise of Brazilian specialty lots at competitions and cupping tables has been one of the more significant stories in specialty coffee over the past decade.

Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Indonesia

Indonesian coffees, particularly those from Sumatra, offer a flavor profile that is unlike anything else in the specialty world. The distinctive earthy, herbaceous, full-bodied character of Sumatran coffees — Mandheling, Gayo, Lintong — is the result of a traditional processing method called wet-hulling (giling basah), in which the parchment is removed while the coffee still has high moisture content, creating a unique fermentation dynamic. These coffees are divisive among specialty buyers: some find them fascinating and complex; others find the processing-driven earthiness too dominant. They are nonetheless important components of many espresso blends and have a devoted following among consumers who prefer a heavy, savory, low-acid cup.

CHAPTER 21

Seasonality

What is seasonality all about? When is a coffee in season?

Coffee, like all agricultural products, is seasonal. It is grown in cycles determined by climate, harvested once a year (in most origins), and has a quality window that begins when it arrives at your warehouse and ends — in terms of peak cup performance — somewhere between twelve and thirty-six months later, depending on the coffee and storage conditions. Understanding seasonality is essential for planning your offerings, managing your inventory, and communicating accurately with your customers.

The harvest calendar for coffee varies significantly by hemisphere and by altitude within producing countries. In the Northern Hemisphere — which includes Ethiopia, Kenya, most of Central America, Colombia, and Mexico — the main harvest typically occurs between October and March, with some regional variation. In the Southern Hemisphere — Brazil, Peru, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea — harvest falls between May and September. Colombia, due to its geography and equatorial position, has two harvest seasons per year, allowing for a relatively continuous supply of fresh coffee.

Understanding Crop Years

The term 'new crop' refers to coffee from the most recent harvest, while 'past crop' refers to coffee from an older harvest. The transition between crop years can create gaps in supply — moments when the previous year's coffee is running low and the new harvest has not yet been processed and exported. Managing these gaps requires careful forecasting and, ideally, relationships with exporters who can give you early visibility into new crop timing and availability.

Coffee from a well-stored new crop is at its peak quality in terms of brightness, aromatics, and sweetness. As coffee ages in green form, these qualities typically diminish: the acidity softens, the aromatics flatten, and the cup can develop a woody or papery quality sometimes called 'baggy.'

This degradation happens at different rates depending on how the coffee is stored and its original processing method — natural coffees, with their higher residual sugars, often hold their quality somewhat longer than washed coffees.

"Chasing seasonality is chasing freshness — and freshness, in specialty coffee, is synonymous with aliveness."

Communicating Seasonality to Customers

One of the most important implications of seasonality for buyers is the need to rotate offerings. A coffee that has been sitting in your lineup for two years is not the same coffee it was when you first listed it — even if the bags look the same from the outside. Building a culture within your company of regular lineup review, driven by quality rather than habit or convenience, is one of the hallmarks of a serious specialty program.

For customers, the rotation of offerings is a feature, not a bug — but it needs to be communicated thoughtfully. Customers who come to love a particular coffee need to understand that it is seasonal, that it will eventually sell out, and that its return depends on the next harvest. Building this expectation from the beginning of a customer relationship, rather than trying to explain a disappointing out-of-stock situation after the fact, is much more effective.

CHAPTER 22

Storing Coffee

How should you store green coffee?

Green coffee is a living, breathing agricultural product. Unlike roasted coffee, which degrades relatively quickly, green coffee can be stored for extended periods under the right conditions — but those conditions must be carefully managed if the coffee is to arrive at the roaster in the same quality as when it left the washing station. Poor storage is one of the most common causes of quality loss in the specialty supply chain, and it is a problem that occurs at multiple points: at origin, during transit, at the import warehouse, and at the roastery.

The enemies of green coffee quality in storage are moisture, heat, light, and aromatic contamination. Moisture causes mold, fermentation, and physical damage to the beans. Heat accelerates the chemical changes that cause green coffee to age. Light, while less damaging than moisture or heat, can degrade volatile aromatic compounds over time. And aromatic contamination — storing coffee near cleaning products, food items, gasoline, or anything else with a strong odor — can leave permanent off-notes in the cup.

Ideal Storage Conditions

The SCA recommends storing green coffee at a temperature between 60 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit (15.5 to 21 degrees Celsius) and a relative humidity between 50 and 70 percent. In practice, the most important thing is consistency — dramatic fluctuations in temperature and humidity, which cause the coffee to absorb and release moisture repeatedly, are more damaging than modest deviations from the ideal range. Climate-controlled warehousing is the gold standard; air-conditioned, well-ventilated storage is the practical minimum for a serious specialty program.

Coffee should never be stored directly on concrete floors, which can transmit moisture and cold through the bags. Pallets that elevate the bags off the floor, maintain airflow beneath them, and allow easy inspection are standard practice. Bags should be stacked no higher than the point at

which the weight of the upper bags begins to compress the lower ones, which can cause physical damage and restrict airflow.

"The best green coffee in the world, stored carelessly, becomes mediocre. Storage is not glamorous, but it is inseparable from quality."

GrainPro and Other Modified Atmosphere Solutions

GrainPro bags, which create a sealed, moisture-resistant microenvironment within the outer jute or woven polypropylene bag, have become increasingly common in specialty coffee logistics, particularly for high-value lots. When used correctly — with the bag properly sealed after each opening — they provide meaningful protection against moisture fluctuation and aromatic contamination. They do not, however, fully substitute for good climate control; even inside a GrainPro, coffee in a hot, humid warehouse will eventually degrade.

Vacuum-sealed canning and nitrogen-flushed packaging are used for the highest-value micro-lots, where the investment in extended freshness preservation is justified by the price and rarity of the coffee. These solutions extend the quality window significantly but add cost and require careful handling.

CHAPTER 23

Packaging

What is the best way to package and move green coffee?

The packaging in which green coffee travels from origin to roastery is not merely a container; it is a critical part of the quality preservation system. The right packaging protects the coffee from physical damage, moisture, odors, and pests while allowing the natural respiration that keeps the beans alive and stable. Choosing appropriate packaging is therefore a quality decision as much as a logistical one.

Traditional green coffee packaging is the 60-kilogram jute sack — a natural fiber bag that has been the standard for decades, offers reasonable breathability, and is biodegradable. Jute sacks are still widely used for commodity coffee and for many specialty coffees shipped at origin-standard quality. Their limitations include limited moisture protection, vulnerability to odor contamination, and the fact that they can harbor insects or fungi if damaged.

Specialty Packaging Options

For specialty coffees, a range of packaging innovations have improved on the traditional jute sack. The most common enhancement is the inclusion of a GrainPro or similar inner bag within a jute or woven polypropylene outer sack. This combination offers the structural integrity and traditional handling properties of the outer sack with the moisture and odor protection of the inner liner. Some buyers specify this combination as a minimum requirement for any specialty lot they purchase.

Grain bags with Mylar or foil liners, used in combination with nitrogen flushing or vacuum sealing, represent the current premium standard for the highest-value coffees. They extend the freshness window significantly and are increasingly common for competition-grade micro-lots, Gesha, and other coffees where the cost of premium packaging is small relative to the value of the coffee inside.

"Packaging is the last line of defense between months of careful farming and a disappointing cup. Choose it accordingly."

Lot Sizes and Handling

The size in which green coffee is purchased and packaged has direct implications for freshness management at the roastery. Large lots — full containers of 320 bags or more — offer economies of scale but require significant warehouse capacity and create pressure to roast through the coffee before it ages past peak quality. Smaller lots — from a few bags to a few hundred kilograms — are more manageable in terms of freshness but may carry higher per-unit costs for freight and handling.

The trend in specialty coffee has been toward smaller lot sizes, both in response to the economic reality of limited production in high-quality micro-lot sourcing and in recognition of the freshness benefits of buying smaller quantities more frequently. Many buyers now structure their green inventory as a rolling series of smaller lots rather than a few large annual purchases, which allows for greater responsiveness to quality and seasonal availability.

CHAPTER 24

Defects

What's wrong with your coffee?

Green coffee defects are physical abnormalities or contaminants found in a lot of green coffee that can negatively impact cup quality or indicate problems in growing, processing, or storage. Understanding how to identify and assess defects is a core competency for any coffee buyer, because defects directly affect the quality of the roasted coffee — and because defect counts are one of the most objective measures available for evaluating a lot's overall quality.

The SCA Green Coffee Classification System divides defects into two categories. Category 1 defects are the most severe and include full black beans (which indicate disease or severe overripe fermentation), full sour beans (which indicate fermentation defects that produce acetic or lactic acid), pods or cherries (whole dried fruit), large stones, large sticks, and certain types of fungal damage. A single Category 1 defect found in a 350-gram sample disqualifies the coffee from the specialty grade.

Category 2 Defects

Category 2 defects are less severe but can still meaningfully impact cup quality when present in sufficient numbers. They include partial black beans, partial sour beans, parchment beans (beans still inside their inner husk), floaters (low-density beans that often taste flat or fermented), shell beans (a genetic malformation), broken or cut beans, hulls and husks, and small stones, sticks, and water damage. Up to five Category 2 defects are permitted in a 350-gram specialty sample.

Performing a defect assessment — which the SCA calls a physical analysis — involves taking a 350-gram sample of green coffee, spreading it on a flat surface, and sorting out all defects by category and type. This process reveals information about the processing quality, the sorting and grading at the mill, and any damage that may have occurred during storage or transit.

"Defects don't lie. They tell you, with uncomfortable precision, where something went wrong in the journey from tree to bag."

Defects and Cup Quality

The relationship between defect counts and cup quality is real but not perfectly linear. A coffee with a very low defect count may still produce a disappointing cup if it was grown at low altitude or processed carelessly. Conversely, an imperfect-looking sample can occasionally produce a surprisingly good cup — though this is the exception rather than the rule. For buying purposes, defect assessment is best used as one input among several, alongside cupping evaluation, moisture content measurement, and visual inspection of color and consistency.

When you receive a lot with unexpected defects — either in a green analysis or as revealed in the cup — document it carefully, photograph the affected beans if possible, and communicate the issue to your supplier promptly and specifically. The feedback loop from buyer to supplier on defect issues is one of the most valuable quality improvement mechanisms available to the specialty coffee industry.

CHAPTER 25

Decaf

How do you handle decaf in your coffee buying?

Decaffeinated coffee is often treated as an afterthought in specialty coffee programs — a necessary concession to customers who cannot or prefer not to consume caffeine, rather than a genuine expression of quality and craft. This is a missed opportunity. Excellent decaffeinated coffee exists, and buyers who invest the time to source it thoughtfully can build meaningful customer loyalty among the roughly 10 percent of coffee drinkers who regularly choose decaf.

The starting point for excellent decaf is excellent green coffee. Decaffeination is not a process that improves coffee — it removes caffeine while ideally preserving as much of the coffee's original flavor as possible. A mediocre coffee that goes into a decaffeination process will come out as a mediocre decaf. A great coffee — high-quality, carefully grown and processed, from a distinguished origin — gives the decaffeination process something worth preserving.

Decaffeination Methods

Several decaffeination methods are in commercial use, each with different implications for the coffee's flavor and chemistry. The most common in specialty coffee are the Swiss Water Process (SWP), the CO2 (supercritical carbon dioxide) process, and the sugarcane process (also called the ethyl acetate or EA process).

The Swiss Water Process, developed in Canada, uses osmosis and activated charcoal filtration to remove caffeine without the use of chemical solvents. It removes 99.9% of caffeine and is certified organic. Well-executed Swiss Water decafs can be excellent, though some tasters find that the process reduces flavor intensity slightly compared to the original green coffee.

The CO2 process uses supercritical carbon dioxide as a solvent to selectively remove caffeine. It is particularly effective at preserving aromatic compounds and is considered by many specialty buyers to

produce the best-tasting results. It is also more expensive than other methods and is used primarily for higher-end specialty decafs.

The sugarcane process, popular in Colombia, uses ethyl acetate derived from fermented sugarcane molasses as the decaffeinating solvent. It tends to produce decafs with a slightly sweeter, more rounded character and is gaining rapidly in popularity in the specialty market. Coffees processed by this method are not certified organic but are generally considered food-safe and low in residual solvent.

"Great decaf is not a compromise — it is its own category of excellence, deserving the same care and attention as any other coffee in your lineup."

Buying and Marketing Decaf

When buying decaf, apply the same standards you would to any other coffee: cup it carefully, assess it honestly, and buy only what you would be proud to serve. Communicate the origin, the processing method, and the decaffeination process clearly on your packaging and marketing materials — decaf customers, like all specialty customers, appreciate transparency and story.

One practical consideration: decaffeinated green coffee generally has a shorter shelf life than its caffeinated counterpart, because the decaffeination process can alter the bean's physical structure in ways that make it slightly more susceptible to moisture and oxidation. Store decaf with particular care and rotate inventory more frequently than you might for other coffees.

PART THREE

Building Your Program

Starting Out, Learning, and Growing as a Buyer

CHAPTER 26

From Scratch

What if you're just getting started as a coffee-buying business?

Starting a coffee buying program from the ground up is one of the most exciting and overwhelming experiences in the specialty coffee industry. You have arrived at a moment when the tools, knowledge, and community available to new buyers are richer than they have ever been — and also at a moment when the bar for what constitutes genuinely excellent specialty coffee has never been higher. Navigating this landscape requires a strategic approach, a tolerance for learning-by-doing, and a fundamental humility about how much there is to know.

The first priority for any new buyer is to invest in your own education — systematically and without cutting corners. This means, at minimum, pursuing Q Grader certification or SCA coffee diploma coursework to develop a rigorous sensory foundation and a working knowledge of coffee science, agriculture, and trade. These programs are not cheap, but the return on the investment — in credibility, in relationships, and in your own knowledge and confidence — is enormous.

Building Your First Supplier Relationships

As a new buyer, you are entering a market where established relationships already exist and where suppliers have limited time to invest in new partnerships of uncertain commercial value. This is not a reason for discouragement, but it is a reason for realism. Your most effective approach is to start small, be impeccably professional in every interaction, pay on time without exception, and allow the relationships to develop at a pace that is sustainable for both parties.

Importers are often the best entry point for buyers who are just getting started. A good importing partner can give you access to a wide range of well-sourced coffees, provide logistical support, and connect you with producers and exporters as your relationships develop over time. As your volume and confidence grow, you can begin developing direct

relationships alongside your importer relationships, using the importer as a bridge while you build your own connections at origin.

Defining Your Scope

One of the most common mistakes new buying programs make is trying to cover too much ground too quickly. In the excitement of discovering the breadth and diversity of the coffee world, it is tempting to want to offer coffees from every origin, every processing method, and every price point simultaneously. Resist this temptation. Start with a focused, manageable number of offerings — perhaps three to five coffees — and develop your sourcing, quality control, and storytelling for each one with depth and care before expanding.

"Every expert buyer was once a beginner. The difference between those who became great and those who did not was not talent — it was the willingness to learn from every cup, every trip, and every mistake."

Building Your Community

The specialty coffee industry is, at its best, a remarkably generous community. Experienced buyers often willingly share knowledge, introduce newcomers to their supplier contacts, and offer candid feedback to those who ask for it with genuine curiosity and respect. Organizations like the SCA, the Roasters Guild, and regional specialty coffee associations provide structured environments for this kind of knowledge sharing. Attending trade events — Specialty Coffee Expo, Re:co Symposium, World of Coffee — puts you in the same room as the people whose work you admire and creates opportunities for the kind of spontaneous conversations that can shift the direction of your career.

Starting a cupping group with other local buyers, roasters, and coffee professionals is one of the highest-value investments you can make as a developing buyer. Regular cupping together calibrates your palates, exposes you to a wider range of coffees than you might taste alone, and builds the kind of collegial trust that makes honest feedback possible.

CHAPTER 27

Learn from the Best

What can you learn from experienced buyers?

No book, however comprehensive, can substitute for learning directly from people who have spent years or decades in the field. The most effective coffee buyers in the world are distinguished not just by their technical knowledge — though that is substantial — but by the habits of mind and practice they have developed through long experience. Understanding what those habits look like is among the most valuable things any aspiring buyer can pursue.

The first lesson that experienced buyers consistently emphasize is the primacy of the cup. Everything in coffee buying ultimately points toward the cup — toward the experience of a person lifting a beautifully prepared beverage to their lips and tasting something that moves them. It is easy, as a buyer, to become absorbed in the logistics, the relationships, the data, and the commercial pressures of the work, and to lose touch with that simple, direct experience. The best buyers never do. They cup constantly, they remain curious about what they taste, and they never stop asking why a coffee tastes the way it does.

The Importance of Humility

Humility is not a word often associated with business success, but in coffee buying it is a genuine competitive advantage. The world of coffee is so large, so diverse, and so constantly evolving that any buyer who believes they have fully mastered it is almost certainly wrong. New origins emerge, new varieties are discovered, new processing techniques transform familiar flavor categories, new research changes our understanding of the biochemistry of roasting and extraction. Staying genuinely open to learning — from producers, from young colleagues, from customers, from the coffees themselves — is what keeps a buying career vital and progressive over the long term.

Humility also means being honest about mistakes. Every buyer has purchased coffees they regretted, missed opportunities they should have

seized, and made forecasting errors that cost their company money. The buyers who grow the most are the ones who examine those mistakes with curiosity rather than defensiveness, understand what went wrong, and apply that understanding going forward.

"The best buyers are perpetual students. They know that the coffee world is larger than any single person's understanding of it — and they find that fact thrilling rather than daunting."

Wisdom from the Field

Drawing on the published work and documented insights of experienced specialty buyers and educators — including figures like Peter Giuliano, whose work at Counter Culture Coffee and the SCA helped define specialty coffee's approach to sourcing ethics and quality evaluation; Trish Rothgeb, who contributed foundational thinking to specialty coffee cupping standards; and Willem Boot, whose decades of work in origin development have shaped the careers of dozens of buyers — several themes emerge consistently.

The first is the long view. Great buying programs are built over years and decades, not quarters. The relationships that produce the most exceptional coffees are the ones that have been cultivated with patience and genuine investment over time. Resist the pressure to optimize for short-term wins at the expense of the long-term trust that sustains a program through difficult seasons and market disruptions.

The second is curiosity as a professional discipline. The buyers who consistently find the most exciting coffees are the ones who are always asking questions, always exploring unfamiliar origins and techniques, always tasting with the expectation that they might encounter something they have never experienced before. Curiosity drives discovery, and discovery drives quality.

The third is the integration of ethics and quality. The specialty coffee movement at its best is not just about finding great-tasting coffee — it is about ensuring that the people who grow and process that coffee are fairly compensated, that the environments in which it is grown are protected, and that the entire supply chain operates with transparency and accountability. The buyers who have had the most enduring impact on the

industry are those who have held quality and ethics together as inseparable commitments, rather than trading one off against the other.

A Final Word

Coffee buying is a vocation. It asks for your full attention, your deepest curiosity, your most scrupulous honesty, and your genuine care for the people and places that make this remarkable beverage possible. It will take you to extraordinary places, introduce you to extraordinary people, and challenge you in ways you cannot fully anticipate at the outset of the journey.

The world is full of coffee to discover, and the best of it is waiting for a buyer who is ready to find it. Go cup something wonderful.

— End —